

Somalia: Development by other means - Wildcat



Article analysing the war in Somalia in the early nineties, and the destruction of pre-capitalist social relations there through both military and 'humanitarian' means.

While we disagree with the views of the authors on journalists, we believe the article contains useful information and analysis of the conflict and its roots.

The War in Somalia

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We don't have any means of knowing directly what's going on but the revolt of the proletariat has been strong enough to leave traces in the bourgeois media in the form of events which it simply can't explain if clan-based armies and their supporters were the only source of resistance towards the UN. They have not been able to deny that many clashes between UN troops and Somalis have been with largely unarmed civilians rather than with the soldiers of General Aideed. On occasions residents of working class districts of Mogadishu have built barricades which even Aideed's militiamen are not allowed to pass. Often the media will try to make out that there is just a blind nationalist, or even racist, rage against foreigners – ignoring the fact that almost all the foreigners in Somalia are journalists, soldiers or others directly involved in the UN war effort.

Some of the most outrageous media bullshit is that concerning the "warlord" General Mohammed Farah Aideed. In June 1993 there was a UN offensive, supposedly in response to the deaths of 24 Pakistani UN soldiers sent to close down Aideed's radio station, in which numerous buildings were attacked around Mogadishu. The stated aim was to capture Aideed and bring him to trial for the deaths of the soldiers. The real aim was clear – it was to strengthen support for Aideed in the same way as the US bombings of Baghdad were designed to strengthen support for Saddam. Aideed at first welcomed the American invaders but then saw how hated they were and became a champion of anti-imperialism, his radio station pumping out anti-UN propaganda. This improved his standing with the proletariat no end.



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Another war for oil

The economic and strategic reasons for the US/UN intervention in Somalia are fairly clear.

Somalia has enormous reserves of oil. Four major American oil companies (Conoco, Amoco, Chevron and Phillips) obtained the rights to prospect nearly two thirds of Somalia's surface area just before President Siad Barre was overthrown at the beginning of 1991. Somalia was classed by the World Bank as one of the most promising African countries in terms of petroleum resources. It does not yet possess a significant oil industry or oil producing proletariat but it almost certainly will in a few years time. Creating social peace through terror there could pay handsome dividends for the bourgeoisie (literally for those investing in oil). The geographical location of the country is also important, allowing control of the tanker routes to the Red Sea and the Gulf. But it's easy to make too much of these sorts of considerations. Capital has strategic interests all over the world – why should there be a need for such an overwhelming display of force in this particular little corner of it?

The main reason is that the US government thought that they could win without

too much effort, installing a Somali government of their choice and helping American national unity recover from the battering it was given by the uprisings of May '92. At the same time the image of the UN could be improved. Everybody loves famine relief agencies, so what could be better than showing UN troops protecting them? A few thousand US troops could have been stationed there for a spot of counterinsurgency training. In other words, Somalia could have played the military training role for the US that Northern Ireland has for Britain. At present the US Army is being reorganised as a force which can actually take over pieces of territory and police them for long periods of time rather than one which only knows how to bomb them to bits and then get the hell out. Unlike British troops, most American troops don't know how to be cops. This is changing.

At the Fort Chafee army base in Arkansas 50,000 soldiers a year are put through a special training programme involving an artificial country called "Cortina". This has a guerrilla army (played by a US infantry battalion) and police, army and civilian authorities provided by a defence consultancy firm called BDM International. The troops are taught how to liase with the local authorities and which suspects to free and which to hold. They are given the necessary ideological preparation for carrying out massacres – angry demonstrations by villagers often shield guerrillas. None of this prepared them for the horrors they would face in Somalia.

The US bourgeoisie must have thought that after years of war the Somali proletariat would be so crushed that they wouldn't resist the US/UN invaders, and might even welcome them as liberators. They were wrong.

Brutality

The brutality of the UN forces is something that the media don't even try to hide. On 13 June at least 14 Somalis were killed when UN troops from Pakistan fired a heavy machine gun directly into a crowd protesting at the American bombing of various districts of Mogadishu, supposedly arms dumps for General Aideed. The commander of the Pakistani troops justified the shooting in words chillingly reminiscent of those used by British military commanders after Bloody Sunday in Northern Ireland, or those used after various massacres in Vietnam.

He said that Somali "gunmen" routinely use civilian crowds as human shields. No guns were found on any of the dead. The head of UN peace-keeping

operations, Kofi Annan, said that the incident showed the need for UN forces to be better equipped with tear gas and other riot control gear. On other occasions US helicopters have fired cannon shells and rockets at hospitals and even at the offices of their beloved relief agencies.

As soon as they arrived the UN troops made it clear that they were there to act as cops. When the US Marines first arrived in Mogadishu they encountered no military resistance at all. The first violence they were involved in was beating up some unarmed Somalis sleeping in a hangar at the airport! A wave of brutal "weapons searches" followed. Sometimes the lads even went a bit too far for their masters to tolerate. In March a Somali civilian was beaten to death while being detained at the Canadian UN compound at Relet Huen. Four paratroops were charged with torture and second-degree murder, the first time any Canadian soldier has faced such charges resulting from UN operations.

Much of this brutality, though, is in direct response to working class militancy. On 24

February there were widespread riots against the UN. Thousands of unarmed Somalis, described in the press as "supporters of General Aideed", fought UN troops and attacked the US embassy using just knives and rocks and shouting anti-American slogans. They were fired on with machine guns from US Cobra helicopters. The UN have never admitted how many they killed. The French embassy was also attacked. On September 9 Pakistani UN troops were attacked by a mob of hundreds of Somali men, women and children. A hundred or so were killed when UN helicopters opened fire.

Smoked pork...

During a battle starting in Bakara market in Mogadishu on October 3 at least 500 Somalis were killed. Two US helicopters came down. Given the importance of helicopter pilots in carrying out massacres it's hardly surprising that the charred bodies of some of these pigs were dragged through the streets of Mogadishu by a jubilant crowd. Another one was protected from the righteous wrath of the proles by Aideed's men, raising the spectre of a

"hostage crisis" for the US government. The attitude of the local population is well illustrated by the following quote from the *Guardian* (5 Oct 93):

""There were six Americans inside the helicopter. I saw it had been hit and then it

crashed down on six children who were coming out of the Koranic school', said Hassan Issa Ahmed, whose house was five yards from the crash site. 'The Americans defended themselves by opening fire on all sides. So people went into their homes to get their guns. We killed three of the Americans and one of them ran away'".

On other occasions UN troops have been dragged into crowds at feeding centres and hacked to pieces. And it's not just soldiers who are being brutally dealt with. When the Americans first arrived in December '92 there were around 600 journalists about, including more than a hundred photographers and cameramen just at the famous beach landing of the marines. Now there are just eight Western correspondents. Recent TV pictures have been produced by means of a miniature video camera left in the hands of the Somali driver of the Reuters team.

This mass withdrawal of the media is the result of the deaths of three Reuters and one Associated Press journalist, all deliberately killed by angry mobs. In July '93 three photographers and a soundman were killed after American helicopters rocketed an alleged

"command and control base" for General Aideed in an area packed with civilians, killing at least 30. According to the testimony of Scott Peterson (*Daily Telegraph*, 13 July 93), a journalist who narrowly escaped with his life, the hacks were under the protection of Aideed's men at the time. Another surviving joumo-pig, Mohamed Shaffi of Reuters, described how he burst into a nearby residential compound to escape but a woman living in it chased him back on to the street (*Independent*, 13 July 93). This incident led to calls from the Italian government for military operations to be suspended. The few media scum who remain are generally too frightened to leave their hotel rooms.

At the time of writing the US troops are still scheduled to leave by March 31, 1994 and the French and Belgians before then. Half the 16,000 US troops stationed in Somalia are kept

well out of harm's way – they're at sea. The rest are mostly based at the huge fortified UN

compound in Mogadishu and aren't even in a position to defend the UN's own property.

According to one UN official, Somalis slip over the wall night and day, ripping

off anything they can. "We're losing vehicles from the port before we even inventory them" (*Guardian*, 27

Nov 93).

No police force can operate without some degree of cooperation from the policed population; UN troops are no exception.

...and powdered milk

The US invasion of Somalia was originally called "Operation Restore Hope", with the stated aim of maintaining food aid to the starving children whose images had graced the TV screens of the Western countries. This is true up to a point, in that "aid to the starving" is a well-used capitalist code word for the use of food as a weapon against the proletariat. Capital creates famine. In Africa this is usually the result of the destruction of non-capitalist ways of obtaining food – subsistence farming, herding, hunting and gathering. It might do this through a declared war between states (extremely common in Africa) or through its

"peaceful" development – a bloody war against the independent producers! In other parts of the world where there is already a proletariat famine may be deliberately created by means of sanctions as a means of crushing proletarian resistance. Either way, food aid is then dangled in the faces of the starving to ensure that they do capital's bidding. "Food for Work" schemes, the Third World equivalent of workfare, are just the most blatant examples of this.

Food "aid" might be organised through the UN or through charities, otherwise known as NGOs (non-governmental organisations) or PVOs (private voluntary organisations). As every cynic knows, charities are businesses – but not just because they provide fat salaries and conferences in Rome with generous expenses. Charities must obey the logic of capitalist expansion, they must use money to make more money and so expand capital's Evil Empire of alienated labour. In the Western countries where they are based this means such things as paying for more adverts showing starving children, putting money into the coffers of advertising agencies, public relations companies and newspaper owners and opening more charity shops which gullible idiots work in for free. Charities must compete with each other for the money available and so are forced to expand and restructure. In the famine-stricken regions where they operate it means creating dispossession and the means of maintaining it, so

creating more "clients" (starving people) for the charity and thus attracting more aid.

Food aid is often just a hidden form of subsidy for whichever regime happens to be in power, being used to feed the army – this applies to Bosnia as much as Somalia. In Angola UN aid is being distributed through the military on both sides in the devastated city of Kuito, even though there are no civilians on the UNITA side of town. In Kurdistan famine and food aid are used to strengthen the Kurdish nationalists and to take back the gains of the 1991 uprising by forcing starving insurgents to sell their guns, anti-tank rockets and printing presses..

Food which doesn't go directly to soldiers ends up being sold by local merchants, and buildings and vehicles must be rented from other entrepreneurs who become dollar millionaires in the process. The presence of all this money and commoditised food accelerates the destruction of subsistence food production and encourages cash crop production. In the case of Somalia the country went from being self-sufficient in food in the early '70s to being one of the most food-dependent in Africa by the mid-1980s.

Many of the large houses in Mogadishu which are rented to relief agencies and the media are owned by one Osman Atto, one of the richest men in the country .He used to be the representative of the US oil company Conoco and owns their office, which is being used by the US special envoy to Somalia, Robert Oakley. Atto is also General Aideed's main

financier. Whenever a plane carrying food flies into an airport the relief agency concerned has to pay several thousand dollars to Somali middle men for landing rights and security.

Atto was held in preventive detention for a few days but the UN have done nothing to curtail his legitimate business activities.

Development

Somalis are a distinct ethnic group who, prior to capitalism, were mostly farmers in the South of what is now Somalia and nomadic pastoralists in the North. The colonial era saw the North under British rule and the South under Italian rule. Fortunately for the nomads in the North the British did very little with it. In the South development began –the best land was grabbed by Italian farmers who grew cash crops such as cotton and sugar cane. Life for the nomads has never

been easy but mass starvation was very rare before capitalism. When the rains failed they could migrate long distances – something which became impossible with the creation of nation states and private property in land.

Serious capitalist development in Somalia began with Siad Barre's military coup in 1969. The country was put under "scientific socialism", what little industry existed was nationalised, close relations were established with the USSR and a massive military build up began. The administration was centralised in the name of "eradicating clannism and tribalism". Barre was committed to development through war and the militarisation of society. The already existing famine enabled the regime to accelerate its plans for settling nomads, who made up 80% of the population at the time. They were forced into agricultural "communes" where they were expected to work under military discipline. This was part of a regional trend. The nomadic way of life of millions of Africans was, and is, a major headache for the capitalist class because nomads don't respect national borders, don't attract Western aid and are almost impossible to tax, conscript or control.

In July 1977 Barre launched a major invasion of the Ogaden region of Ethiopia – its inhabitants were "Somalis" too – rapidly capturing the whole region and dramatically boosting his own support. Ethiopia had also recently become a client state of the USSR and the USSR decided to back Ethiopia with 18,000 Cuban troops. Barre turned to the Americans and by 1981 Somalia had become a client state of the US and the economy began to be privatised. The Somali troops were run out of Ogaden but the war was continued by the Western Somalia Liberation Front guerrillas organised by Barre's regime. Life for the nomads in the region became intolerable and hundreds of thousands ended up in refugee camps in Somalia. Concentrating them in arid localities resulted in overgrazing by the animals they had left. Western relief agencies arrived with food – far more than was necessary. Most of the food was going to the Somali army to maintain the war to dispossess the nomads to create more refugees... Many camp commanders were WSLF officers and the WSLF and the Somali Army would come to the camps to conscript teenage boys. Just like in Barre's pro-Soviet phase the inhabitants of the camps were instructed in political ideology by state officials called "politicians" – this time they were taught to blame the Russians and Cubans for their plight. Aid was turning "empty" desert into burgeoning towns. Barre's program of military-led accumulation was being enthusiastically supported by hordes of young middle class Western do-gooders who built the infrastructure and tried to teach former nomads how to grow food so that they

could settle down and become peasants and agricultural labourers.

Who, after all, could object to the building of roads – even if most of the people who used them were soldiers, cops and refugees being herded from one place to another? The camps were supposed to be temporary. Many of them are still there. In 1981 a study done by aid workers found that the relief industry accounted for two-thirds of the country's economy.

Towards the end of his reign Barre was also receiving \$100 million a year in military and

economic aid from the USA, making Somalia the third largest recipient of US foreign aid behind Egypt and Israel. It didn't do him much good.

The '80s were characterised by even more war than before as regional nationalist movements seized more and more areas of the country – in the North West (former British Somaliland), the Somali National Movement; in the Central and Western regions, the United Somali Congress; in the South, the Somali Patriotic Movement. In July 1989 there were two days of anti-government demos and riots in the capital. The writing was on the wall for Barre.

Washington suddenly discovered that he was a human rights violator and cut off aid. At the end of 1990 the USC took the capital. In January 1991 Barre fled, leaving the capital in the hands of an unstable alliance of regional and clan leaders. This quickly broke down leading to a war in which hundreds of thousands died. General Aideed was the military commander of the USC and a former ambassador to India under Barre.

The war in the capital reduced its population of one-and-a-quarter million by half. The southern countryside was looted by soldiers to the extent that whole villages were left with no food and no animals in the middle of the dry season. Throughout the war troops protected the luxury houses of the capital and the agri-business plantations. Villagers in Qorioli starved to death next to huge banana plantations. If they even gathered grass to eat they were likely to have their hands tied together and a bullet put through the palms.

So the Somalis lost the battle against dispossession through war, a process that made the Highland Clearances look like a vicarage tea party. They became proletarians (apart from the few who became bourgeois generals and nationalist leaders) .But what sort of proletarians have they become? A large percentage of

the men have been soldiers in the various nationalist/clan armies and are no strangers to the use of fire arms. In general the wide availability of guns has had a detrimental effect on working class solidarity by intensifying the war of all against all. In other parts of the Horn of Africa traditional tribal disputes over natural resources which might have occasionally resulted in a few spearings can now turn into massacres. On the streets of Mogadishu robbery of fellow proles by men with guns is pretty common. At the same time guns are often used by workers against their employers, which these days usually means the charities and the UN, who are just as keen to force down pay as any other boss. For example, following the disappearance of several food trucks in November '92 the World Food Program laid off its long haul Somali drivers for three months and brought in Ethiopians to work for half the wages. In response to these kind of attacks, charity administrators have been known to be besieged in their compounds by their own security guards demanding more pay. At the end of 1992 a UNICEF house manager was nearly killed when he tried to sack some workers.

The Somali proletariat also have an undying hatred of the UN and all its works – no doubt heightened by the knowledge that Boutros Ghali, Secretary General of the UN, used to be the foreign minister of Egypt when it supported Siad Barre. The fact that they have forced the most powerful nation on earth to drastically alter its foreign policy should inspire class struggle militants across the world. There is much we can learn from them – not least that terrorising journalists really spoils the game for international capital. The struggle of our class in Somalia can only sharpen our understanding, and hatred of, food aid charities – those insidious capitalist rackets with shops and offices on almost every main street in every town in Western Europe and America.

A very useful article about food aid charities, written by a disaffected ex-aid worker can be found in the *Village Voice*, 19 Jan 1993. A major article about the use of food as a weapon against the proletariat can be found in *Zerowork* #2 (1977).

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